

Understanding Landscape Architecture Industry Needs: A Preliminary Review of Graduates Communication Proficiency Model (CPM)

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Submission date: 3rd August 2021

Accepted date: 1st September 2021

Published date: 29th November 2021

ABSTRACT

Communication is a fundamental part of the working environment that comprises interpersonal relations and communication between groups and individuals and other social interactions within the active community. Communication and soft skills have become an important issue due to the lack of study and development, especially in the Landscape Architectural practice. It can be seen that the lack of communication and soft skills by current graduates has affected employability leading to a large quantity of unemployment and lack of advancement within the landscape industry. Hence, to keep up with the current trends of what employers seek within these landscape architecture graduates, it is believed that a paradigm shift in the training of students must take into account the development of Communication Skills within the curriculum to help aid the development of graduate employability skills. A method of assessing communication skills is also required to rate a Landscape Architect's level of communication competence to further enhance the graduates' career in the industry.

Keywords: *Soft Skill, Communication Skill, Landscape Architecture, Employability Skills*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Since the 1980's the importance of communication skills and soft skills has been foreseen as a critical skill required in the job market and substantial in achieving a higher professional career. Studies conducted from 1986 until 2006 showed that the abilities known as soft skills, in which communication is part of them, would be essential to professional achievement in the future (Brungardt, 2011). In today's current economy,

workers require knowledge and skills that are non-transferable and specific to their job, and also employability skills if they wish to contribute to the expansion and growth of a corporation or industry (Dania et al., 2014). Employability skills are also known as job preparation skills, which include reading, writing, problem-solving, arithmetic, and believing. The current industrial market is looking towards globalisation and diversification, and industries are now moving forward in looking for not only technical expertise or hard skills but also candidates who have employability skills or soft skills (Madar & Buntat, 2011).

These skills can increase employability and help in the transition of a graduate into a competent worker (Alrifa, 2019). Employers are also looking for graduates who have specific skills within three (3) significant areas, which are strong academic and thinking skills, strong technical skills within the field of the specialty, and finally, employability skills such as communication and teamwork skills (Rasul et al., 2013). It shows communication development has a vital role in creating employability skills for fresh graduates. It is also crucially proven from the above statements that higher learning institutions must produce graduates who have technical skills and employability skills. Within the field of Landscape Architecture, a survey was done in 2014 by the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA), and it was found that being a good communicator and having other soft skills are the abilities most often show up as a trademark and expertise fundamental for accomplishment in the Landscape Architecture Industry. It proves that being a good communicator and having soft skills are needed as technical skills in becoming a successful Landscape Architect, specifically in the landscape architectural practice.

Landscape Architecture is a field that deals with the design of outdoor areas, public open spaces that include structures to achieve functional and aesthetic environmental and social holistic spaces. With a tremendous and practical Landscape Architectural design approach, a township or any development can also increase its revenue and economic outcome. Currently, several local government universities in Malaysia offer diploma and degree courses in Landscape Architecture mainly, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), and Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Malaysia (UIAM). Several private universities and colleges also provide training in Landscape Architecture, such as Lim Kok Wing University, Geomatika College University, and Infrastructure University. From this information, we could see the competition for the placement of graduating students has become more competitive since the early establishment of the Landscape Architectural Industry. Ilhaamie et al. (2018) state that the rise in the quantity of public and private universities has created more opportunities for employability among fresh graduates. Still, at the same time, due to the limited positions available within these industries, many graduates with degrees could not find jobs and ended up unemployed.

As of 2021, only ninety-one (91) registered landscape consultancy firms have been registered under the Institute of Landscape Architecture Malaysia (ILAM). This number is relatively low compared to more established disciplines such as Architecture Firms and Engineers, creating stiff competition for fresh graduates seeking employment within these firms. Students should master other skills to be more competitive in the industry and communication skill is relevant skill to be looked into to entice future employers. The question remains if these subjects are adequate in developing the student's communication skills during their studies or more should be done to make sure the graduates are more prepared to face the challenges of the working environment. The review aims to identify indicators and frame a method to rate an individual's level of communication competence for employment and advancement in the landscape architecture industry.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Importance of Communication Skills

In the current economy, a lack of English proficiency and communication skills contributes to Malaysia's high unemployment rate among fresh graduates (Ting et al., 2017). According to the Malaysian Qualifications Framework 2nd Edition (2017), communication is defined as the capacity to communicate, convey information, ideas, and reports pertinently and professionally and respond through different mediums, the scope of audience, and fitting language. Accordingly, Lippman et al. (2015) defined

communication as the forms of communication, including oral, written, nonverbal, and listening skills used in a workplace. They add that communication skills are essential because, with good communication skills, an individual can help develop other soft skills, such as social and leadership skills. Similarly, Zaharim et al. (2009) and Williams (1986) defined communication in the context of the built environment as the skill to present ideas confidently and effectively, not only with engineers but also with the public through aural, oral, and written modes. They further stated that Landscape Architects should be adept in both verbal and nonverbal communication. Effective communication skills typically result in more meaningful, rewarding interactions with people on and off the job and increased capability to meet individual desires. Communication requires having a personal touch, establishing a direct relationship, keeping secrets, gaining mutual understanding, and avoiding complications and these could make communication to be more effective (Prabavathi & Nagasubramani, 2018).

Malaysian Qualification Agency (MQA) outlines eight domains to be mastered by students. These are non-technical skills: knowledge in the areas studied, practical skills, social skills and responsibility, the value, attitude and professionalism, communication skills, leadership and teamwork, scientific problem-solving skills, entrepreneurial and management skills, lifelong learning skills, and information management (MQA, 2017). Meanwhile, the Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia MOHE (2006) stated that the soft skills model includes generic skills across multiple domains of learning and skills group of personal aspects. University graduates should possess these employability skills to meet employers' needs and the challenges of everyday work life. Elements of soft skills by MOHE include communication skills, critical thinking skills, teamwork skills, continuous learning, entrepreneurship, ethical and moral professional skills, and leadership skills. As can be seen, communication skill is an important aspect that needs to be mastered by students in higher education as stated by both MQA and MOHE.

Respectively, A.O & A. A (2016) stated that there are three (3) forms of communication that are commonly used in the working environment, which are verbal communication, non-verbal communication, and written communication. The first form is verbal communication, which is the sharing of information between individuals using speech and face-to-face interaction. On the other hand, non-verbal communication includes the use of facial expressions, bodily movement, and personal appearance to pass on the information, and finally written communication, which involves the use of letters, notices, memos, and manuals to convey information within a working environment. For Landscape Architects, another type of communication used is graphic communication that employs graphic elements as a form to convey information (Entwistle et al., 2018). These graphic elements include symbols such as glyphs and icons, drawings and photographs, and the passive contributions of substrate, colour, and surroundings. It is the process of creating, producing, and distributing material incorporating words and images to convey data, concepts, and emotions. Prabavathi and Nagasubramani (2018) updated these types of communication by stating that there are currently many more types of communication and can be summarised as WOVEN, which stands for written, oral, verbal, electronic, and electronic non-verbal. However, according to them, the most common forms of communication used are still oral and written communication. Verbal communication can also be mixed with visual mediums to help establish the conveyed message more precisely and easily understood. For example, for Landscape Architects, visual communication is used through drawings and graphics during verbal presentations.

Most of Malaysia's job advertisements commonly cited excellent communication skills as a predetermined requirement that includes good language proficiency, communicative skill, and interpersonal skills (Ooi & Ting, 2015). Unfortunately, research has also realised that most graduates have issues with relevant employability skills, including communication skills, especially English, which is not taught to the graduates (Hanapi & Nordin, 2014). Thus, employers have emphasised that institutions of higher learning should be able to place communication as a high priority in the institution's curricula (Rasul et al., 2013). In the built environment, graduate architects would benefit from having good soft skills such as communication skills, teamwork, time management, leadership, and problem skills (Salleh et al., 2015). This statement is also relevant for graduated landscape architects from the same industry related to design and construction. There is a clear need to approach communication skills and develop landscape architects educational and training programs (Palea et al., 2012)

A study conducted by Crawford and Dalton (2011) revealed that for employers, listening effectively, communicating accurately and concisely, and effective oral communication are the top communication skills needed by employees. According to the study, verbal communication ranked higher than written communication in terms of importance. A further study conducted by them in 2016 within the built environment industry sees that built environment professionals should master the primary soft skills, communication skills, decision-making, and problem-solving skills and become self-manageable during the early phases of a career. Successful mastering these fundamental skills may allow the professionals to continue to learn higher-order skills such as professionalism and leadership (Crawford & Dalton, 2016). Lederman (2016) further added that the importance of communication skills (CS) in the workplace often stems from one's aptitude to transfer information and express ideas to other colleagues within the working environment.

According to Rasul et al. (2014), communication supports team development and daily operations in many manufacturing industry contexts. Employees who have good ideas must be able to communicate these ideas effectively to sell them to clients. It is further added that employers across many manufacturing industries mention that employees without adequate communication skills have more difficulty doing their tasks. Landscape Architects must communicate their design ideas through meetings with clients, other consultants from other fields, and presentation techniques concerning the landscape architectural industry. Having only hard skills is no longer relevant in producing high levels of quality for a Landscape Architect. Still, it must be supplemented with soft skills such as a good attitude, teamwork, and communication. Report writing ability in Landscape Architecture is most necessary, where employers mentioned that they need employees who can write a good report that can convince others. Thus, not only a Landscape Architect should be competent in verbal communication but also written communication. Another important aspect of communication skills is interpreting manuals and written information such as graphs, manuals, and schedules to perform tasks and relaying information via writing (Dania et al., 2014).

Soft skills are vital for graduates as those who possess good technical skills but lack employability skills are considered low-quality graduates. The current industrial market is looking towards globalisation and diversification, and industries are now only looking for technical expertise or challenging skills. Still, at the same time, they require candidates to have employability skills or soft skills (Madar & Buntat, 2011). Accordingly, Ooi and Ting (2015) stated that in Malaysia, there is an emphasis on soft skills training for graduates, for example, information technology and entrepreneurship, are mandatory nonexclusive courses in specific colleges and universities. Universities are currently providing mandatory English or Malay language subjects that have been obligatory for students to take as part of the curriculum and a condition to graduate (Musdiana & Soo, 2016). University students should prepare themselves with content knowledge and technical skills and acquire several soft skills during their studies. The question remains if these subjects are adequate in developing the students' soft skills during their studies or more should be done to make sure the graduates are more prepared to face the challenges of the working environment.

This research proves that having hard skills alone without good communication skills may hinder a potential landscape architecture employee's progress towards achieving a much higher hierarchy. Mastering these soft communication skills may improve one's standing within the organisation and further develop his career in the future.

2.2 Interpersonal Communication Competence (ICC)

Interpersonal Communication Competence (ICC) has been a subject of much discussion as employers emphasise the importance of employability skills in today's work environment. Today's employers look to the extent of communication, both oral and written, in recruiting and evaluating applicants, specifically fresh graduate students, and promoting existing employees (Okoro et al., 2017). Spitzberg (2007) stated that interpersonal communication competence achieves the outcomes or goals in the communication process. As stated by Okoro et al. (2017), communication is a crucial requirement to accomplish personal and group goals or objectives as employees need to communicate with one another and with other co-workers, supervisors, managers, and directors to achieve the common task and purpose.

According to Purhonen (2007), hypothesising interpersonal communication competence is a long and complex process. Still, interpersonal skills are specific communication skills or behaviour used to achieve

a particular result or objective in a face-to-face encounter with a single or several individuals. Examples of interpersonal skills in a profession include having contact with employees such as training, directing, coaching, counselling, praising, disciplining, problem-solving, and working in groups to achieve a common goal. Every individual has interpersonal skills, but some individuals will show exceptional interpersonal skills than others who demonstrate weak or non-existent interpersonal skills. Hence, according to Nastasiu (2018), individuals with Interpersonal Communication Competence (ICC) are capable of adaptability, ethics, empathy, emotional monitoring, and intellectual complexity. It, in turn, makes these individuals excellent leaders, commanding respect and admiration from the subordinates and peers. This statement proves that communication skills are essential skills and critical to demonstrate interpersonal competence, and communication effectiveness is a necessary trait for managerial and career advancement.

Similarly, Dewi et al. (2020) highlighted that studies in other industries have shown that interpersonal communication can influence the competence of employee performance. An investigation is needed in the Landscape Architecture industry to identify what interpersonal communication variables can strengthen Landscape Architects' performance. It is also to help landscape companies and firms to achieve a competitive advantage and expand their resources. To summarise, Interpersonal Communication Competence (ICC) is the act of reacting and relating to others, oneself, and the surrounding environment. Communication competence is fundamental for an individual that can be accumulated through life, professional training, and everyday experiences through interaction with other individuals. Communicative competence comprises oral skills and other means such as listening, emotions, empathy, and ethics. Communication competence can also be seen through nonverbal communication such as body language, face mimics, gestures, and visual eye contact.

One of the fundamental issues regarding communication skills is the method to rate an individual's level of communication competence. A method used to measure communication skills is by using the Conversational Skills Rating Scale (CSRS). CSRS was developed in 1984 by Spitzberg and Cupach in response to several problems in assessing interpersonal communication skills. CSRS has now been used in various disciplines, thereby providing a utility as a research and assessment instrument to assess communication skills (Spitzberg, 2007). The CSRS can be used as a collective measure of conversational skills by simply summing the scores of 25 behavioural items, which act as indicators. The Conversational Skills Rating Scale (CSRS), as presented in Figure 1, was developed to provide a comprehensive instrument for assessing self or other interpersonal skills in the conversation context. Combining verbal and nonverbal behaviours in its content, the instrument can be used in various contexts, including instructional contexts. The CSRS consists of 25 behavioural items written at relatively minuscule levels, which comprise four (4) skill clusters:

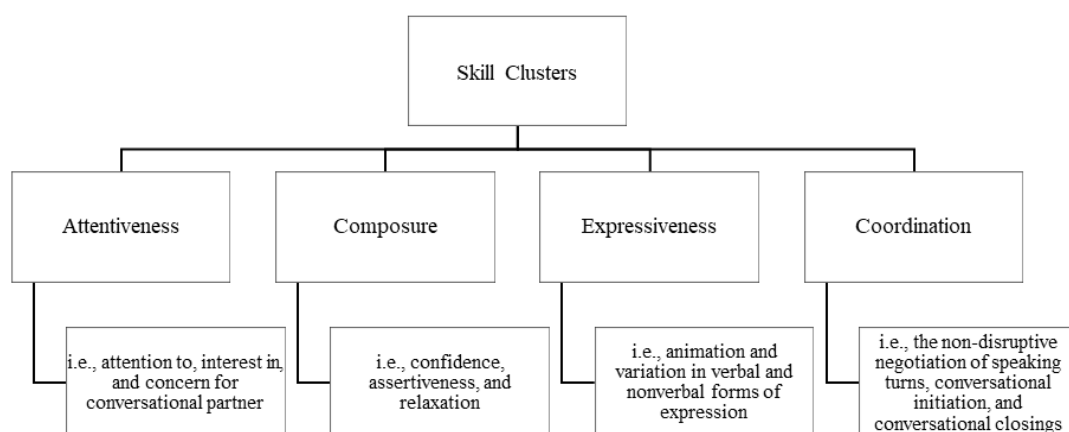


Figure 1: Conversational Skills Rating Scale (CSRS) Four (4) Skill Clusters adapted from Spitzberg (2007)

Acting as a guide, the CSRS and its component variables (attention, composure, expressiveness, and coordination), as indicated in Table 1, can provide a diagnostically relevant and construct

accurate measure of perceived competence in conversational studies. It appears to have potential in additional applications that will require more investigation.

Hence, as mentioned by Prabavathi and Nagasubramani (2018) and Devito (2019), due to the current epidemic situation requiring more online communication, the cell phone has forever changed the interpersonal communication process by creating another alternative means of communication such as texting. This list can be updated in the current times by adding electronic communication as a Skill Item. Another Skill Item that can be added to the Landscape Architecture industry is graphic communication, which uses graphic elements including symbols, such as glyphs and icons, images, such as drawings and photographs, and can consist of passive contributions of substrate, colour, and surroundings. Capturing the character and qualities of the landscape design through persuasive illustrative drawings can inspire the audience and sell ideas to clients (Entwistle et al., 2018).

Table 1: Descriptive indicators in Conversational Skills Rating Scale (CSRS), adapted from Spitzberg (2007)

Behaviour Items	Individual's Competence Indicator
Speaking Rate	Speaks neither so fast (e.g., words per minute) nor so slowly as to disrupt the receiver's comprehension and/or response
Speaking Fluency	Displays speech instabilities such as stuttering, omissions, repetition of words or obvious pause fillers such as "uh, um, er, ah, etc".
Vocal Confidence	Shows paralinguistic firmness calmness/forcefulness, and steadiness of expression.
Articulation	Pronounces words in a way that they are easy to understand by the audience.
Vocal Variety	The individual has various pitches, tones, and ranges of verbal utterances while presenting to the receiver.
Volume	The individual speaks at an audible but not extreme level; no strain or distraction of attention.
Posture	Exhibits a comfortable posture (shown by frequency of postural shifts) and is adaptive to the audience.
Lean towards Partner	Displays shift and positions frontal body trunk concerning to partner as the situation permits during a conversation and the body is orientating to the receiver.
Shaking and nervous twitches	Shows jerking motions of the limbs or head, and/or shaking hands or fingers (fidgeting).
Unmotivated movements	Displays adaptors, play with hair or other objects, or otherwise occupies in self-focused behaviours that have no apparent direct relation to the topic of the conversation.
Nodding of Head	Moves head in a vertical arc (i.e., 'yes' motion) reinforcing feedback signifying understanding, agreement, or acceptance.
Use of Gestures	Displays hand, arm, and head movements to compliment and/or elaborate words.
Use of Humor / Stories Appropriate to Context	Uses jokes, puns, double-entendre, stories, characterization, etc to elaborate on the topic to the receiver to enhance engagement.
Smiling and Laughing	Displays laughter, chuckles, and/or smiles (upturned corners of the mouth, teeth visible).
Use of Eye Contact	Uses direct eye contact in accordance with expressive and regulatory standards of conversation and context.
Asking of Questions	Seeks information from receiver through use of formal or colloquial interrogative forms.
Speaking about partner/ receiver	Involving the partner / receiver as a topic of conversation through comments or questions.
Speaking of Self	Involving self (interests, attitudes, beliefs, values, etc.) as topic the of conversation through comments.
Expression of personal opinion	Expresses their attitudes, values, and/or beliefs about subject matters of own choosing, or expresses these utterances too aggressively or passively.
Topic initiation	Innovates new subject areas and comments that stimulate new lines of topic development.
Maintenance of topics and follow up comments	Sustains topic coherence through extension and reinforcement of partner utterances.
Interruptions of partner	Interrupting, over-talks, and/or provides vocal feedback during partner turns at the talk in that disrupts the conversational routine and receive no apparent negative sanction from the partner or receiver.
Use of time	Balances the relative proportion of speaking time in a manner suitable with the topic.

The earliest forms of the CSRS used a three anchor, five-response scale, ranging from “inadequate” to “needs work” to “adequate.” This scale has eventually evolved to a 5-point competence continuum scale that is relatively unique by using the terms inadequate (communication is awkward, disruptive, or results in a negative impression of communicative skills), fair (occasionally embarrassing or disruptive, sometimes adequate), adequate (sufficient but neither very noticeable nor excellent. Produces neither particularly positive nor negative impression), good (better than adequate, but not outstanding), and excellent (smooth, controlled, results in a positive impression of communicative skills), as adapted by Spitzberg (2007) in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Competence Scoring Indicator adapted from Spitzberg (2007)

Scale Rating	Indicator
1: Inadequate	Awkward, disruptive, or results in a negative impression of communicative skills
2: Fair	Occasionally awkward or disruptive, sometimes adequate
3: Adequate	Sufficient but neither very noticeable nor excellent. Produces neither particularly positive nor negative impression
4: Good	Better than adequate, but not outstanding
5: Excellent	Smooth, controlled, results in a positive impression of communicative skills

Assessment of communication skills should view competence in oral communication as an organised whole that is perceived as more than the sum of its parts of several interacting dimensions. At the very least, all verbal communication assessments should contain an evaluation of knowledge of the communication method, elements, guidelines, and dynamics of a communication experience, and the capacity to recognise what is suitable and incorrect in a communication scenario.

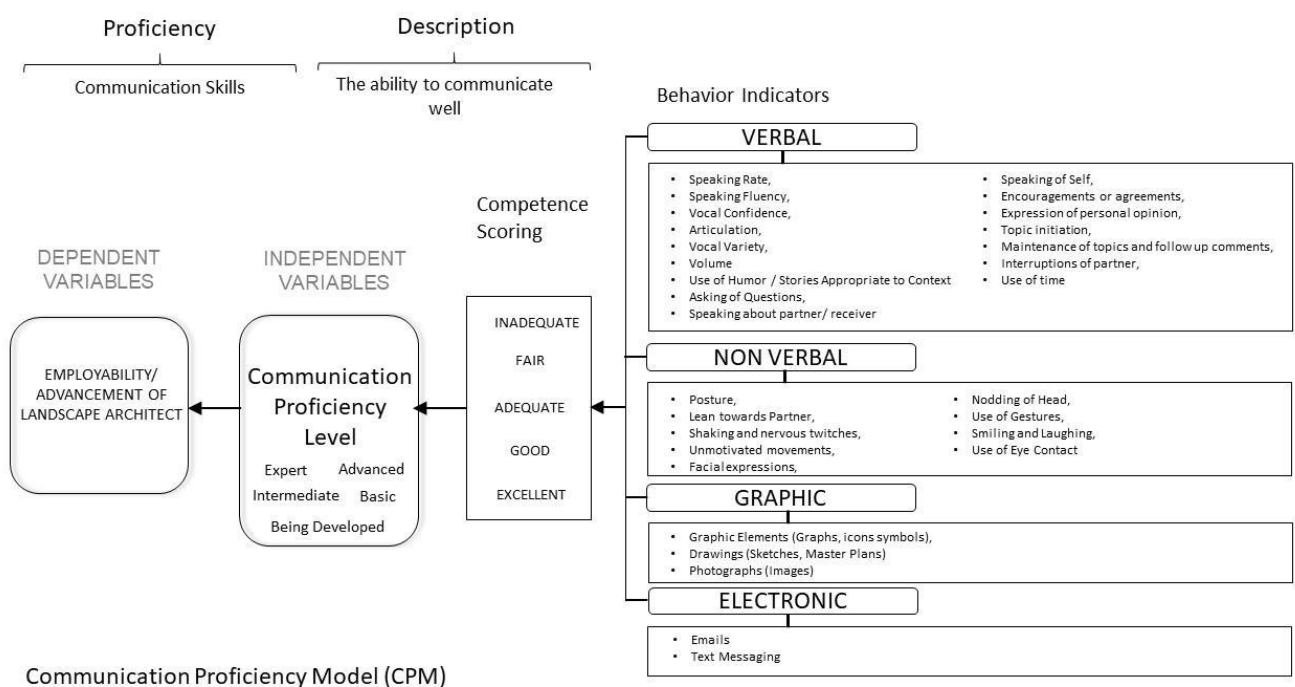


Figure 2: Communication Proficiency Model (CPM)

With this regard, a communication proficiency model (CPM) is needed by using the behaviour items listed in Figure 2 and by rating, where competence indicators are used. This model would be proven valuable in the process of employability and advancement (EA) for Landscape Architects to improve their professional standing within a company.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The research methodology is based on the aims and objectives of this research and involves the Mixed Research method. The qualitative approach is appropriate for this study as it gives the chance to allow selected participants (Landscape Architecture employers and employees) to describe their experiences in depth. The qualitative method supports the use of open-ended questions through interviews with both the employer and employees. In-depth interviews are idyllic for collecting data on the Landscape Architect perspectives, experiences, and personal accounts, mainly when discussing soft skill topics. The strong point of qualitative research is its capability to provide intricate literary portrayals of how individuals experience a certain Landscape Architect's soft skill. It includes data on the "human" side of a current subject and, in this case, it is the issue of communication soft skill development within the Landscape Architect's career and how it could benefit advancement within the industry.

In conclusion, the Mixed Mode method is chosen for this research. The quantitative method provides a survey to relevant participants to rate the importance of different types of soft skills and compare the results to get a clearer understanding of which soft communication skills are more critical to the employer and employee development. It will be the basis for the method to rate an employee's soft skills for advancement. The qualitative approach is selected due to its being usually more flexible. It allows better freedom and adaptation by the researcher and the study participants, the stakeholders within the Landscape Architecture Industry (Zainudin, 2012). This method can help identify the subcategory of critical communication competencies, specifically within the continuous employees' improvement process. This information gathered can help employers analyse the impact of current market changes within the process of staff employment (Gabor et al., 2019).

4.0 CONCLUSION

Interpersonal Communication Competence (ICC) directly impacts the direction of a Landscape Architect within a firm and company. Being a Landscape Architect, one deals with a considerable amount of time communicating with other individuals such as clients, contractors, suppliers, and other consultants as part of their job scope. Communication skills are needed to sell the design ideas and require the Landscape Architect to be knowledgeable in design and hard skills acquired during their studies. It also requires skills in telling a story, creative problem solving, accepting criticism, negotiation, and business ethics to get approval from clients. Landscape Architect needs to be able to integrate communication skills with technical aspects of Landscape Architecture.

Within this research, Landscape Architects can get a better picture within the industry on the importance of communication skills. It will be helpful to guide in the development of a successful Landscape Architect and help create an awareness of the inculcation of soft skill training in academic studies. Assessment of communication skills is required to rate a Landscape Architect's level of communication competence to further enhance their career in the industry. It is vital to carry out a continuous assessment to make Landscape Architects appreciate effective communication in their field.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors wish to acknowledge 600-RMC/MYRA 5/3/LESTARI (119/2020) granted by UiTM Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) and Research Management Institute (RMI) for permission to conduct the research titled "Understanding landscape architecture industry needs: An analysis of graduates communication proficiency model (CPM) in employability and advancement (EA) dimensions."

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